

*A few days after the end of Earthbound. A different ending- Jeff's spirit could not return from the place outside of time where the youths defeated Giygas.*

It was a small funeral. Jeff had little family and few friends. Indeed, there were few friends to be had in the frozen wilderness of Winters. Ness suspected most of Jeff's school would have come, but the funeral was happening after school had let out for the summer, and all the boys were gone. Tony and Maxwell came, however. Their parents were at their sides, looking lost, wanting to console their children but unsure of how to, never having come to grips with death themselves.

The funeral was naturally held on the school grounds, heated to a comfortable temperature by one of the myriad Andonuts inventions. Tracy had been incredulous when Ness told her where it was to be held.

"Why would anyone want to be buried at school?" she wondered aloud. Ness had just sort of laughed to himself. Jeff wouldn't have it any other way. He never would have wanted to rest far from a place where learning was going on.

Ness recognized most everyone attending, or could at least guess their connection. There were Tony and Maxwell and their parents. There was Apple Kid, a kindred spirit to Jeff. The two of them would have made quite the team, Ness had often thought. A few Saturns were in attendance, attracting shy stares from everyone who had never seen their race before, which was pretty much everyone. The little Saturns sat cradled in their chairs, much too small for human-sized furniture. They were obviously sad, but it didn't look like they knew what to do about it. Pain and suffering were only a recent discovery of the happy Saturn race, an experience brought for the first time by Giygas through Master Belch.

Then there was the Andonuts family. Some eccentric-looking bespectacled men and women who Ness assumed were aunts, uncles and cousins. There were accompanied by a few cavemen. The cavemen were an inexplicable mix of butlers and disciples to Jeff's father, the famous Dr. Andonuts. The renowned doctor himself was already sitting in the front row. For once, Dr. Andonuts looked fully present in the moment, but Ness knew what a terrible way it was to be brought back to reality.

Poo was also there. The foreign prince's face was more set than usual, his high cheekbones like stony cliffs. His prim mouth was drawn tightly. When they first met, Ness wasn't sure if Poo ever felt emotion. But eventually he realized Poo just rarely showed it with his face. Here at the funeral, Poo was wearing a black Western-style suit and matching black tie, surely an extravagant show of emotion for him. Ness would have wagered that Poo had studiously researched what he should wear to a Western funeral and wouldn't have settled for anything but the customary black suit. He also carried an elegant sword, the one they had found underneath the ruins to the south of Jeff's school. Regardless of the suit and tie, Poo's sword combined with the top-knot that sprouted from the top of his otherwise bald head made him look just as foreign as ever. Presumably he had just teleported in. There seemed to be no other way to travel to or from his home country of Dalaam.

Paula was there too, of course. Her dad was there, but not her mother. Her mother would be running their daycare, the family business. Paula had her father's nose and blond hair but she had, thankfully,

failed to inherit his mustache. She sat forward in her seat, still and silent. She would be speaking on behalf of the youths. Ness wasn't much for public speaking, and Poo insisted he wasn't familiar enough with the funerary practices of the West to do Jeff justice. But Ness suspected that he was just too affected. Jeff had been Poo's closest friend among the four of them; they had always fought side by side.

Ness's sister was there along with both of his parents. Some strange mother-reasoning had resulted in Tracy and Ness sitting in between their parents. Ness mom's dirty blond hair framed her smile-creased face. His father was originally not planning on coming. He had told Ness over the phone that he had an important trip coming up for his work - surprise, thought Ness - and Ness figured since he had never actually met Jeff, it would really be alright after all if Dad didn't attend. And so they left it. But when his mom heard about the decision, she sent Ness away as she spent a few hours on the phone with Dad. She simply informed Ness later, "Your father will be coming."

Ness was surprised how relieved he felt then. He hadn't known it was bothering him until he felt better. Soon after they met, Ness had once joked to Paula that he had been raised by a telephone. If his life was a play, he said, a telephone would be cast as his dad. And then in the end credits, a telephone would walk across the stage and take a bow. Ness laughed as he made the remark, but Paula didn't laugh. She never laughed at things she didn't think were funny. She didn't laugh, and then he realized he didn't think it was funny either. They had finished the rest of their Mach Pizza in silence.

Ness looked over at his father, who was staring at nothing. The salt-and-pepper stubble that dusted his jaw line was flecked with more salt than the last time Ness had actually looked closely at his dad. Ness wondered if things would be different now that Giygas was gone. Giygas had made people go crazy, turn evil, without anyone thinking it was out of the ordinary. Dad's incessant business trips: could they be the work of Giygas, too? There was a time when Ness would have scoffed at the idea, but in the past few weeks he had started to think that things were more intricately connected than he had previously wanted to admit.

The service started, and everyone stood up as the pallbearers - cavemen, nicely cleaned up in suits and ties - bore the casket forward. Ness watched the casket for a moment, and then the reality of the situation hit him. A lump formed in his throat and he realized that Jeff's - his friend's - dead body was inside the coffin a few feet away from him, never to move again. If he were to open it up, he would see Jeff's freckles and blond hair, and almost certainly his rectangular glasses. His bottom lip trembled madly of its own accord, like a puddle of water in an earthquake, and Ness felt a tingling sensation somewhere in his sinuses as his eyes began to tear up. He pressed his tongue firmly against the roof of his mouth in an attempt to turn the tears back. Ness didn't know why; he knew nobody would fault him for crying at a funeral, but he still made himself breathe evenly, strongly, deeply, desperately fighting against tears.

The casket reached the front and after they all sat down, someone or another took the podium and started speaking. Ness couldn't make himself pay attention. The speech was a cloudy fish tank of unclear meaning, shabby clichés swimming lazily through stale water. The tragedy of such young

potential being prematurely ended, our loved one being in a better place, and the like. Ness instead found himself instead thinking of Jeff's death a few days prior.

Ness had relived the moment of Jeff's demise often in the past few days. Giygas's last screams piercing through the silence of that otherworld turned slowly into the sobs of Paula, who had woken up before Ness did. She was hunched over Jeff's body in the grass of Saturn Valley, clutching Jeff's shirt, saying over and over again, "I'm so sorry, Jeff. I'm so sorry." Confusion and panic washed over Ness and time seemed to ebb and flow around him, moments lasting for minutes and minutes seeming to last for moments. Jeff would have waved his hand dismissively and said something about the temporal cortex phase inhibitors in Ness's brain just needing to readjust. One moment Paula was letting out centuries-long wails and the next moment Dr. Andonuts was kneeling over his son before a millisecond had elapsed, quivering and in shock. Another century passed and suddenly a storm of psychic energy was whirling around Poo as he woke up. The prince's eyes were wide and his face was trembling. He wanted desperately to be able to help Jeff somehow with the mad hurricane of energy that he had summoned around him, but he knew there was nothing to be done. Paula and Ness were the only two that could sense the energy, but all three of them well knew that even their talents combined could do nothing to bring Jeff back.

Still, confusion and time washed over Ness like ocean waves and he began to feel nauseated. Ness still felt a residue of nausea as he relived that moment. They had known Jeff wouldn't make it back. They had discussed it the night before they had boarded the Phase Distorter. They were all fairly certain that only the psychically powerful consciousnesses of Ness, Paula and Poo would be able to traverse the vast gulf of space and time to return to their bodies, and Jeff's would never return to its body in Saturn Valley. Jeff still had insisted on going.

"You need me," he had said. "That's why I'm with you now. You need me and if I don't go with you now, none of you will return anyway, and Giygas will claim me too, in the end."

Paula, Ness and Poo had finally acquiesced and consented to take Jeff with them, but decided not to tell his father that night. They thought that it was simply an unnoticed flaw in Dr. Andonut's plan. In retrospect, though, Ness found it unlikely that Dr. Andonuts hadn't predicted his son's death. The man was brilliant, after all. But he might have been in denial because he knew it was necessary. Ness often wondered how conscious Andonuts had been of the truth.

Ness felt nauseated with shame every time he thought about it. They had all, even Jeff's father, consigned Jeff to his death that night. Jeff was the first to insist it had to be that way, but Ness didn't think he'd ever be able to look back on that night without a pang of guilt.

"Life is complicated," Ness's mother had once remarked to him in a distant voice, after a long phone conversation with his father. Isn't that the truth, Ness now thought.

Poo had eventually regained his composure and let the psychic whirlwind dissipate. The Saturns carried Jeff's body into the house that served as their infirmary. The odd physician somberly pronounced Jeff dead and retreated into his trash can. After a while, Dr. Andonuts convinced the three of them to return

to their homes to let their parents know they were fine. Ness and Paula reluctantly set off for Twoson and Onett after Poo vanished.

The next days passed in a blur and then there was the funeral.

Whoever had been speaking finished. Paula stood up and moved to the podium, glimmering tear-trails arching down her cheeks. The audience watched her, puzzled that a fourteen-year-old was standing up to speak.

"Sacrifice," she began, "is the greatest way a man can hope to honor his friends." Her face twisted up. "And we are honored." She fought back a sob, shuddering. "Jeff was a genius, but he learned a rare gift among geniuses: humility." Her face relaxed a bit as she got into the swing of her speech. Her voice was raspier than normal, but it regained the confident clarity Ness was used to. Now, surrounded by adults, was one of the rare moments he was breathtakingly aware of what set her, Poo and himself apart from other kids. Not just their psychic powers, but a certain gravity of presence. Paula's words carried a weight that no other fourteen-year-old girl's could. She continued.

"Who was it that said, humility doesn't mean thinking yourself less; it means not thinking of yourself? That was a lesson we all learned together, I think, each of us in our own way. There were a lot of ways that it seemed like Jeff didn't fit in with us, and Jeff was fooled for a while into believing they meant that he didn't belong with us. But eventually, he held on to a greater reality: he belonged with us because we needed each other."

Ness knew what Paula was talking about. After Jeff had rescued them from underground captivity in Threed and started traveling with them, it was quite clear that he didn't fit in with Ness and Paula. In Ness and Paula's presence, this came out as joking remarks about the worst third-wheel experience ever - tagging along with a psychic couple on their extended vacation - but Ness saw the serious signs elsewhere. The countless hours Jeff would stay up at night working on inventions in hotel rooms, endlessly soldering together broken junk - television antennas, spray cans, anything - into new contraptions, were Jeff's striving to make up for his lack of psychic ability. As Ness and Paula grew stronger in their psychic powers, Jeff seemed to have felt it was necessary to do more and more to keep up with them. It was painful to watch, but Ness and Paula didn't know what to do. Even Paula, matriarchal wisdom radiating almost comically from her fourteen-year-old frame, was at a loss.

It got worse after Poo joined them. The prince was also very psychically gifted, and Jeff began to feel even more mundane. Jeff was starting to show signs of bitterness at that point and hardly ever said a word to Poo at first.

"The beautiful thing about our journey together," Paula continued, "was that the means were the end. We would have arrived at the final conflict any way we went. The point of our journey was not to get there. We could get there whenever we wanted to. The point of our journey was the journey itself. Jeff was the first to realize that."

Ness had heard those words before, or more or less the same thing. That was when things changed for Jeff.

"The beautiful thing about a labyrinth," their friend Brickroad had told them, "is that the means is the end." That was during the long hours they spent toiling through the labyrinth inside Brickroad himself, for his body was a labyrinth. His voice would come drifting down through the darkness, echoing off the cool, dry sandstone. They had long conversations with him as they wandered through his expansive inner passages. They had asked for a hint and he had responded by telling them the reason why he thought labyrinths were beautiful. "The first labyrinths were on the floors of cathedrals built in the middle ages," Brickroad explained, "Pilgrims would come and follow the winding paths traced on the floor to reflect the twists and turns of the spiritual journey. You would go through a labyrinth to meditate. Contemplation was the goal, not getting through the labyrinth. People who didn't reflect and meditate might get through the labyrinth to the other side, but they would never reach the end, because the end, the prize, was the contemplation. It is through quieting ourselves and paying attention to the twists and turns of our life that we achieve wisdom. That is what a labyrinth represents. The point of the journey is the journey itself. Pilgrims who chase the exit, who run along through the labyrinth wanting only to get out to the other side, never actually reach the end because they are closed to the wisdom that the journey has to offer. The end is the means. The means are the end. That is my hint, friends. It will get you no closer to the exit of this labyrinth, but it will get you closer to the end of it. It will bring you closer to the end of many labyrinths." None of the youths spoke, trying to fathom the meaning of this hint as they plodded along.

"I find there are two types of pilgrim," Brickroad had added as sort of an afterthought, "The ones that chase after the exit and the true Pilgrims that take in the labyrinth itself. Only the second kind ever truly escape; they are the only ones that are ever truly happy."

Chasers and Pilgrims. On their journey they had met plenty of the former and precious few the latter. Plenty of people chasing after all sorts of things. Wealth, fame, beauty, power, friends. None of it was ever enough. That was what the Mani Mani statue represented, Ness had realized. It whispered fame to the treasure hunter Agerate. To the cult leader Carpainter it promised power. It lured the real estate tycoon Monotoli in with visions of wealth. It controlled them all in the end. Ness himself even had a brush with the statue's intoxicating influence. For the longest time, Jeff's Mani Mani statue, the thing he wanted most, was to wield the same kind of power that Ness, Paula and Poo did, to make himself worthwhile to them without realizing he was worthwhile without trying. In fact, it turned out he was necessary to the group because he didn't have psychic powers.

One of the orphans from the school started crying and Ness's mother flew at once into mother-mode, comforting and holding the younger boy. Ness was sometimes surprised at how readily she allowed her son to journey into the world, skipping school and getting into fights. "Only because I know you're doing something big, honey," she had told him. "And I know you'll make me proud, whatever it is you're doing." Ness realized now that while most parents constantly chased after making their kids perfect - again, Chasers - his mother was a Pilgrim, savoring and enjoying the life and energy that her children brought into her household along with all the twists and turns they brought. That was the difference

between Mom and Dad. That's what Dad was missing. He was a Chaser. Always after the next raise, the next promotion. Dad said he worked so much so that their family could be happy, so that they could have an easy life. He didn't see that it he was actually having the opposite effect.

That was the difference between Mom and Dad. That was the difference between Apple Kid and Orange Kid. That had been the difference between Pokey and, ultimately, Jeff. It was why the doors of the Stoic Club were locked fast, its members striving after inclusion into an esoteric Inner Circle of erudition, but their collective intellect instead becoming ingrown and useless. It was why the pharaohs of ancient Scaraba, obsessed with immortality, built their pyramids in order to rule forever but were instead doomed to wander the tomb passages as monsters. In fact, it was who Giygas was. In his bravest moments, Ness dared to hope that when they defeated Giygas, they had defeated the Spirit of Chasing himself, but Ness somehow knew that there would always be Chasers and those who, like Jeff, would have to die because the Chasers can never reach the end. Giygas wasn't the Spirit of Chasing, but just a chase. He has been a Chaser once, but had long since given up everything inside of him to the chase, and went from being a Chaser to just a chase.

"Contentment is a decision we make, not a gift that somehow gets bestowed on us," Paula was saying. "Jeff showed us that joy is choosing to journey for the sake of journeying instead of always chasing after some faraway goal that's never going to be close enough. People who are always chasing are never happy. In fact, deep down, they don't want to be happy, because they know that to stop chasing is to give up on their own abilities, to accept that we can never achieve highly enough, that we are actually powerless to reach that thing we are chasing after. To stop chasing is to surrender. By its very nature, it offends our pride. But in truth, we not only find joy in surrender, but salvation. Jeff, Ness, Poo and I won in the end, but not because we were strong. No matter how strong we were, it never would have been enough. We got to the end of our rope, and quite literally the only thing we had left was prayer. That is how these things work; that is how salvation moves. It was not psychic abilities that brought us victory, but realizing that no power, psychic or otherwise, would ever be enough, and that to believe that it could be enough is to fall prey to the spirit of chasing and to fall prey to Giygas. Jeff's refusal to chase taught us how not to chase, and without him, we would be doomed to slavery to the chase and ultimately to Giygas. It was not power that won the battle - in fact, we stand before you today because for once, power lost - but it was giving up on our own abilities that won. It was Jeff's wisdom that saved the day. He would not have learned that lesson if he had been gifted with the power that he wanted; this is the reason why we needed him, the reason why he needed to not be gifted like us. I am honored to learn such a lesson from Jeff. I hope each of you will come to the same relenting place that Jeff did. There will never be peace in our lives and in the world until all of us do."

Paula sat down, her speech met with hesitant applause. Some people were mildly confused at the references to psychic abilities and something called Giygas, but altogether, Paula had made an impression.

Next, Poo stood up. He assumed the podium regally, as if he was wearing his princely robes instead of a business suit.

"In my country, men like Jeff are rarer than diamonds," the prince declared evenly. "The people of Dalaam offer their honor and thanks to the Andonuts family." He then approached the casket and knelt over it. One swift motion, and before anyone could gasp, he had whipped out his sword, neatly cut off his top-knot, and sheathed the sword again. He took the giant lock of hair and draped it over the casket. Then he unbuckled the sword and its sheath and laid it on top of the casket as well.

"Please take this sword, my friend," Poo said. "Because of your sacrifice, it will not be needed in my country for a very long time."

Poo sat down. The crowd then sang a hymn poorly, led by a distant female Andonut relative's jarring vibratto. The hymn finished and the cavemen lowered the casket into the ground. They proceeded at length to fill in the dirt and as they did, Apple Kid began making preparations of some sort. He was turning knobs and pressing buttons on a large hand-held control. When the burial was complete, the lead caveman nodded to Apple Kid, who pressed a button, causing a great flash of light near the grave. The audience was temporarily blinded but after a few moments they were able to see a complicated stone device resting on top of the grave. Or rather, Ness knew, a stone replica of a device.

"An Eraser Eraser statue," Apple Kid had proudly explained to Ness before the funeral. Ness recognized the headstone to be a scaled-up marble replica of the machine Apple Kid had invented to get rid of the giant and inexplicable statues of erasers that hindered the youths.

"As I'm sure you've guessed by now, the only way to get rid of an Eraser Eraser statue is with an Eraser Eraser Eraser, which is theoretically possible, but practically speaking, quite infeasible. Needless to say, it will be there for a while." Apple Kid seemed torn between the somberness the situation called for and elation about being able to provide thusly for the Andonuts family. Ness smiled and patted him on the back.

The burial complete, the headmaster of the school invited the guests into the school cafeteria, hastily decorated with some austere floral arrangements. There they convened upon cookies and punch and admired a display of the various devices Jeff had thrown together so resourcefully on the road. The food and drink worked its natural effect on the guests, and muted conversation became more spirited and lively. Ness's breathing loosened up and he was able to introduce his father to Paula and Poo and hear what they were planning on doing when they got home.

"So what about you, err..., Mr. Poo? What does the rest of the week look like for you?" Ness's dad asked.

"In my country it is customary to honor the passing of a great warrior by fasting and meditating in solitude for twenty-one days," said Poo. Surely enough, Ness noticed, he had not partaken of the cookies and punch.

"Ah," said Ness's father, holding his cookie-hand awkwardly, perhaps trying to make the cookie in it look smaller. He gave an embarrassed quick-throw-me-a-life-preserver look toward Paula's father, the only

other person in the conversation who was comfortably non-psychic, non-royal and non-family. Paula's father just looked amused.

"But after that," Poo continued, "I imagine I will be very hungry. I will probably teleport to Onett to eat a hamburger with Ness. A hamburger at the right time is a truly glorious occurrence."

Ness's dad stared at him.

"You know," said Paula's dad diplomatically, "the tail end of a twenty-one day fast may not be the right time for a hamburger."

"Meaning?" said Poo.

"You, um, might want to start with some soup or vegetables to help make the hamburger, well, an even more glorious experience."

Poo gave this due consideration and finally concurred, "You are wise, Paula's father. Your Eaglelander food is not for the intestinally meek." Tracy snorted, but managed to pretend it was because she had inhaled a cookie crumb.

"How about you, Paula? Do you have plans for when you get home?" asked Ness's mom.

"Emma Stapleton is having a birthday sleepover on Friday," said Paula. She stared at her punch. "It's funny, this time last year if I'd heard Emma Stapleton was having a sleepover, I'd have killed to be invited. But it just doesn't seem all that interesting anymore."

"You should go, honey," said her father, "if not just to help make someone's birthday special."

"You're right," Paula said, brightening up. "I should go." And that seemed to be that.